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# Plex

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# **Plex**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Bachelor of Arts in Photography

Maryland Institute College of Arts, 2000

Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Film

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011

Director: Major Director: Pamela Turner, Chair, Department of Kinetic Imaging

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## Abstract

PLEX

By Jon-Phillip Sheridan, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Film at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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This thesis explores the evolution of my practice as it developed over my two years of graduate school. I entered school interested in the built environment and how structures helped create subjectivity and provided sites for material and phenomenological transformations. Early in graduate school, I developed a photography series that investigated these issues. However, an awareness of a conversation occurring in the larger art world that questioned the efficacy of photography drove me to consider ways to extend my practice into sculpture and installation. Over the next two semesters, I developed my ideas of light, form and structure into video and sculpture installations that extended these ideas out into the space of the viewer. Ultimately, an interest in light and surface led me back to photography and to the realization that a

studio practice that focused on photography about photography opened up avenues that allowed a photographic practice not to become stagnant but rather to grow and expand.

## **Introduction**

In these past two years of artistic development, I have moved through many different locations within my larger constellations of ideas, gained new perspectives, and experimented with many diverse methods of working. Upon entering graduate school, my goal was to break down creative inhibitions and open up my artistic practice to new potentials of expression, whether video, sculpture, or installation. Yet, in the middle of my graduate studies, I experienced a crisis regarding the artistic efficacy of the medium of photography. However, through an expanded awareness of art theory and contemporary art, mixed with my experiments with other mediums, I was able to rediscover my original fascination with photography's innate qualities. I am now working in a new territory where photography is still my prime instrument, but I have the confidence and experience to use whatever medium is needed.

## **A Short History of My Influences**

The "contemporary" art photography that grew out of the post-Cold War era was deeply indebted to its Postmodern<sup>1</sup> antecedents like Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, Bernd and Hilla Becher and Jeff Wall, though it also reached back to more classical photographic influences like Stephen Shore and William Eggleston. Generally this newer generation of photographers eschewed appropriation and montage and instead utilized straight photographic representational strategies (usually only using digital montage to increase the hyper-reality of their images). Under the influence of 90s globalism, artists like Andreas Gursky leveraged their conceptual influences into a pure opticality. The dead carcass of the picture--drowned by the sea of mass media, and

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<sup>1</sup>Smith, Terry. "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity." *Critical Inquiry* 32.4 (2006): 681-707. Print.



William Eggleston, Jackson, Mississippi. 1972



Jeff Wall, *The Destroyed Room* 1978. Transparency in lightbox 1590 x 2340 cm





Andreas Gursky, 99 Cent II Diptychon, 2001 Chromogenic color print. 6' 9 1/2" x 11' (207 x 337 cm)



Rineke Dijkstra, Kolobrzeg, Poland, 1992. Chromogenic print, 47 5/8 x 39 3/4 in

abused by the postmodern critique--was brought back to life and unabashedly imbued with the seductive lushness of the large format photograph. Artists like Rineke Dijkstra, Gregory Crewdson, Sharon Lockhart, and Thomas Demand, just to name a few, used a wide range of conceptual strategies, some investigating the “everyday,” while others employing more cinematic strategies to blur the lines between fantasy and the “real”.

### **My Work Coming Into Graduate School**



Jon-Phillip Sheridan, Residual #29, Summer 2005. Chromogenic print, 30"x40"

The work made before school that is most relevant to what I did these last two years was my series, Residual. This was large format landscape photography, a mixture of the “straight” documentary tradition with some qualities of the cinematic school typified by Crewdson. I used the found environments of these pictures as sets to create

a narrative outside their normal existence. They were photographed at night to heighten the cinematic potential of the images, but I only used the existing lighting. Light was not just a theatrical device, it was also part of the content of the work, light as a transcendent presence but also as a more corporal “residual” of human development. Here writing in *The Rings of Saturn*, the author W.G. Sebald says,

Our spread over the earth was fueled by . . . incessantly burning whatever would burn. From the first smoldering . . . to the unearthly glow of the sodium lamps that line the Belgian motorways, it has all been combustion. Combustion is the hidden principle behind every artifact we create . . . From the earliest times, human civilization has been no more than a strange luminescence growing more intense by the hour, of which no one can say when it will begin to wane and when it will fade away.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Crisis**

My class started school at the exact moment that a larger art world crisis around photography began. The successful paradigm of post-Postmodern art world photography that began in the 1990s (as summarized above) had seemed to exhaust itself at about the same time that the consequences of the super-profusion of digital images in the era of the Internet 2.0 were realized.

A striking example of this crisis was highlighted by visiting artist Alec Soth's lecture on the futility of photographic practices like his in the face of Flickr, Facebook and the onslaught of Internet delivered images. To emphasize his point, Soth quoted the iconic photographer Robert Frank:

There are too many images, too many cameras now. We're all being watched. It gets sillier and sillier . . . It's just life. If all moments are recorded, then nothing is beautiful and maybe photography isn't an art anymore. Maybe it never was.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sebald, Winfried George, *The Rings of Saturn*. New York: New Directions Books, 1998.

<sup>3</sup>LeDuff, Charlie. "Robert Frank's Unsentimental Journey | Culture | Vanity Fair." *Vanity Fair Magazine* | *Vanity Fair*. Apr. 2008. Web. 10 May 2011. <<http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2008/04/frank200804>>.



As proof of Soth's argument, as of September 2010, five billion images had been uploaded to Flickr.<sup>4</sup>

Also, in spring 2010, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art hosted a symposium entitled, "Is Photography Over?", where they asked their prestigious panel members:

Given the nature of contemporary art practice, the condition of visual culture, the advent of new technologies, and many other factors . . . What is the value of continuing to speak of photography as a specific practice or discipline? Is photography over?<sup>5</sup>

Compounding the notion of a crisis even further were several articles published around the same time, like Jennifer Allen's "Long Exposure", in Frieze magazine, which flatly stated, "Photography is dead".



Flickr user, yeoaron, Woodward's Collage, the five billionth image upload on Flickr (an image which is a digital montage).

<sup>4</sup> "5,000,000,000 « Flickr Blog." Flickr Blog. Web. 04 May 2011. <<http://blog.flickr.net/en/2010/09/19/5000000000/>>.

<sup>5</sup> "SFMOMA | Is Photography Over?" *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA)*. Web. 03 May 2011. <<http://www.sfmoma.org/events/1589>>.



Alec Soth 'New Orleans', 2002. 32 in. x 40 in. (81.28 cm x 101.6 cm)



Robert Frank, Chattanooga, Tennessee, 1955

Now, from the mere distance of just over a year, much of this consternation seems misplaced. Since its invention, the “medium” of photography has been based on constantly changing and evolving technologies. Moreover, I believe that our culture is already adapting to the hyper-saturation of images we receive via the Internet. We interact with the Internet in its own discursive space—even when we carry it around with us via iPhones. However, in this space, images are not encountered as things for contemplation.

On the Internet, images are consumed as moments that are continuously replaced in an endless stream. It is a new and exciting space, a new way of constructing the world, but it does not replace physical spaces of encounter and meditation. Instead it highlights our need for those traditional spaces and the real objects and performances that inhabit them. Pictures can still be a physical experience and photography is just another way to make pictures.

### **Clues Towards a New Way of Working, Found in a Familiar Place**

Yet, in the midst of this crisis, I began to recognize evidence that photography still had some life in it. A new wave of artistic and photographic strategies had begun to emerge that responded to all of these digital-era issues and exhausted paradigms. As far back as the late 90s, artists had begun to work outside of the predominate paradigm, and had begun to investigate and question the content delivery technology we call photography. There were a multitude of nascent strategies that built on the many different phases and contexts of a photograph’s existence, from its process of formal production to its cultural implications.

One of the earliest artists to begin working this way was Wolfgang Tillmans, who had established his career in the snapshot documentary genre and who was a major early influence of mine. Tillmans documented a wide range of subjects, ranging from pictures that address homosexuality to the most mundane still lifes. He treated all his images in a non-hierarchical fashion, and his sprawling installations began to function just as that “sea of mass-media”, but he was appropriating from his own life. Furthermore, Tillmans’s work was always at the boundaries of accepted photographic practices, aesthetically and materially, from utilizing hyper-casual compositions, to laser and photocopy prints taped to the wall or hung by bulldog clips.

Additionally, the various manifestations of photographic material has always been a deep concern to Tillmans, as evidenced by his exploration of so many print types and exhibition strategies. In the 90s, he launched a deeper investigation of photography and the photographic print’s chemical origins, beginning with his *Impossible Color* series where he began to incorporate light leaks and chemical accidents into his images. He developed this process further by making camera-less works by drawing directly on photographic paper with light and chemicals. In his *Lighter* series Tillmans began “to treat the photograph, and especially photographic paper itself, no longer as a reproductive medium, but as a material object”.<sup>6</sup> Here, the photograms are folded and creased and placed in acrylic boxes that treat them like objects. Tillmans says,

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<sup>6</sup>Tillmans, Wolfgang, Julie Ault, Daniel Birnbaum, and Joachim Jäger. *Wolfgang Tillmans: Lighter*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008. Print.





Wolfgang Tillmans, Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Berlin, 1 Oct - 11 Dec 2010



Wolfgang Tillmans, freischwimmer 26, chromogenic print, 70 x 94 inches, 2003



Wolfgang Tillmans, parts of the Lighter series, c-prints in acrylic boxes. Serpentine Gallery, London, 2010



Wolfgang Tillmans, paper drop (London), C-print, h: 12 x w: 16 in. 2008

For me, the abstract picture is already objective because it's a concrete object and represents itself . . . the paper on which the picture is printed is for me an object, there is no separating the picture from that which carries it<sup>7</sup>

Tillmans also explores the materiality of the print from a different angle in his *paper-drop* series, where he re-photographs rolled or “dropped” photographic prints in a pseudo-sculptural condition and re-represents them as flat photographs.

Tillmans’ legacy resonates deeply with me. His treatment of the photographic print as an object (even before he made the *Lighter* series) strongly influenced my work and the way I exhibit. Tillmans was such an important early influence, that it is interesting to see how his abstract, material based images have an effect on my most recent work, as will be discussed later.

### **Contemporary Culture’s Materiality and the “Expanded Field”**

The ranks of artists experimenting with this type of process-oriented, photography about photography, has grown exponentially, and ironically this new trend seems to have come to full bloom in the middle of the “Photography Is Over” moment. This trend seems to have in part evolved out of realist-based photography where artists like Florian Maier-Aichen and Beate Guetschow started to take more and more liberties with digital montage techniques established by artists like Jeff Wall and Andreas Gursky. Maier-Aichen’s practice is the most relevant precedent to a process-oriented photography because it is based on mixing digital, studio work, and even drawing and painting with various antique printing processes, simultaneously referencing the history of the various mediums of photographic language and the motifs represented, the landscape and other archetypes. This trend even influenced established straight

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid





Florian Maier-Aichen, *Above June Lake*, 2005. chromogenic print, 86 x 72.5 inches

photographers like Richard Misrach who attempted to pull off some of his own “photography about photography” with his *Untitled* series (2007-2009), landscape images shot digitally but presented nostalgically as if they were color film negatives. We can also see this trend in the work of Thomas Ruff, a contemporary of Gursky, and his studies of the aura of the digital in his *Nudes* and *Jpgs* series. These were images appropriated from the internet and enlarged to mural prints, making their “phosphorescent light permutations”<sup>8</sup>, the pixels of the computer screen, a visible material structure analogous to brushstrokes.

However, even more relevant to my discussion are the young Dutch

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<sup>8</sup> Marion, Sara L. “Getting Beyond: Is Photography a Lost Tradition? (2006).” *AMERICAN SUBURB X*. Web. 15 May 2011. <<http://www.americansuburbx.com/2009/05/theory-getting-beyond-is-photography.html>>.





Richard Misrach, Untitled, 2007. archival pigment print, 59 x 78 ¾



Thomas Ruff, jpeg msh01. 2004 C-Print, 108.66 x 74.02 inches 276 x 188 cm

photographers, Constant Dullaart, Katja Mater, Jaap Scheeren, Corriëtte Schoenaerts and Anne de Vries, who were featured in the group show *Photography In Reverse* at the Foam Fotografie Museum in Amsterdam from November 2009 to February 2010, just a couple of months before SFMOMA's symposium. Ironically, the premise of this show is based on a series of issues that were front and center in much of the 1980s



Jaap Scheern, Fake Flowers in Full Colour, 2009. 3 dimensional color separation, a composite of 4 separate bouquets each colored

work of artists like Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince--questions of authenticity, originality and authorship. However, instead of post-modernity bringing on this particular crisis, it is now "digitalization".<sup>9</sup> Part of this analysis is correct but it involves

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<sup>9</sup>"ArtSlant - New Generation of Photographers." *ArtSlant - Artists, Exhibits, Galleries and SalesRoom*. Web. 08 May 2011. <<http://sf.artslant.com/ams/articles/show/12666>>

acknowledging that somehow photography felt like it had conquered these anxieties in the 90s and that the digital revolution brought them roaring back. More interesting and more relevant to my work is their other “common ground,” where:

Images are often constructed to create a world entirely of their own, often with a slightly surrealist or absurdest accent; the interplay between fiction and non-fiction is experimented with and the limits of photographic language are explored . . . . Constructions within the space, projections, moving images and installations make up a significant part of the exhibition.<sup>10</sup>

Here, and with a lot of other Dutch artists like Anouk Kruithof, we find an expansion of photography’s potential along a positive trajectory of the 90s generation instead of the critique of its limits as seen in the work of Prince or Levine. Even though many of these



Anouk Kruithof, Check/double Check. Photo installation out of 5 inkjet prints on Hahnemuller fine art paper mounted on Melanine wood.2010

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid

artists are now utilizing mass media forms and themes (“appropriation is no longer a political act”,<sup>11</sup> it is a convention) they do so in a manner more along the lines of visual theorist and cultural critic Johanna Drucker’s “complicity” theory<sup>12</sup>, where she states that artists use the forms and content not in ironic or negative critiques but because they actually like them or see them as integral to their identity. These artists are expanding photography into other mediums and strategies, building on the accomplishments of the 80s and 90s but also reaching back to conceptualists of the 60s and 70s like John Divola who utilized a witty blend of photography, site work, documentary, conceptual art and spacial installation art.



John Divola, Zuma Series (folder one) / LZ14F0CS. 1977

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<sup>11</sup>Robertson, Rebecca. "Building Pictures." *ARTnews*. Mar. 2011. Web. 08 May 2011. <[http://www.artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art\\_id=3223](http://www.artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art_id=3223)>.

<sup>12</sup>Drucker, Johanna. *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity*. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago, 2006. Print.

This movement constitutes what art historian George Baker identified as “photography’s expanded field.” In an essay of that same title written in 2005, Baker establishes that postmodernism knocked photography off of its moors and that it has been drifting away from its original formal precepts. However, this has been a drift of expansion into other mediums like video. Baker’s essay focuses on photography’s expansion into the narrative and cinematic with Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall being the original protagonists, but he also posits that:

. . . other expanded fields for photography may be possible to envision . . . of which I would point to in the more fully spatial (as opposed to temporal) expansion of the photograph we perhaps face in practices stemming from Louise Lawler and James Welling.<sup>13</sup>

In 2005 Baker presciently identified Welling as a possible nexus of influence for a new “expansion” of photography, one that seems to be happening today. Matthew Thompson, in the essay *The Object Lost and Found*, also identifies James Welling as one of the prime influences for recent photography trends, as he sites Welling’s

. . .intense focus on objects, a ‘double stress on simplicity and aestheticism’ that reveals materials not ‘merely or primarily as they are in themselves, but as they are revealed photographically, as they exist within photography or are made manifest by photography.’<sup>14</sup>

Thompson also states that Welling is “a model not only for polymorphous production but also for focused studio work”<sup>15</sup> and that

One of the most striking aspects of Welling’s output is the incredible diversity of his printing methods: photograms, traditional gelatin silver prints, Polaroids, and

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<sup>13</sup>Baker, George. "Photography's Expanded Field." *October* 114 (2005): 120-40. Print.

<sup>14</sup>Thompson, Matthew. "The Object Lost and Found." Web. 08 May 2011

<[http://www.aspenartmuseum.org/aop\\_thompson.html](http://www.aspenartmuseum.org/aop_thompson.html)>

<sup>15</sup>Ibid





James Welling, FIRE (C75), 1981. Gelatin silver contact print 9 ½ x 7 ½ in.

digitally processed prints. That Welling's preoccupation with the photographic surface exists in all of his work, and not simply his more well-known photograms or images of tinfoil, reveals a long-term and multilayered engagement with the photograph-as-object that has been taken up by a number of younger artists.<sup>16</sup>

Thompson's essay covers much of the artistic ground on which my peers and I have been working. He also writes more about the origins of this territory, how the digital has "contributed to a more self-reliant and direct relationship to production—a "maker" culture."<sup>17</sup> Thompson observes that, as noted before, young artists work in a "post-appropriative" order where appropriation elements easily co-exist with elements elaborately hand-crafted by the artist. This trend has manifested itself across all of the

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid

<sup>17</sup>Ibid

arts and goes hand-in-hand with a new renewed interest in objects and material.

Thompson believes that sculpture had taken the lead in investigating contemporary material culture and observes that there is a shifting back and forth between what he generalizes as making and collage. In looking at some recent exhibitions, Thompson notes:

Some exhibitions have examined the ways in which artists have reintegrated the handmade into their practice, often through labor-intensive means. *The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas* identified how this careful positioning of craft alongside mass production creates a “quality of open-endedness wherein questions are posed and single meanings are denied.” Helen Molesworth used this condition of being partly manufactured and partly man-made as a way of reimagining Duchamp’s legacy on postwar sculpture in her exhibition *Part Object Part Sculpture*. Another recent exhibition, *Knight’s Move*, was partially framed around the questions “How can strategies of estrangement, appropriation, and abstraction exist alongside direct engagements with materiality, figuration, and storytelling? Can the makeshift, readymade, and precarious exist in dialog with the meticulous, obsessive, and finely crafted?”<sup>18</sup>

Thompson goes on say that the New Museum’s 2007 exhibition *Unmonumental* was a major influence on the rest of the art world as it spread and solidified this interest in transmateriality well beyond sculpture. Thompson recognizes a renewed interest in craft that works with appropriation in a smooth continuum and he adds that the same can be said with deploying digital techniques. Much like the way that Tillmans used his various images and techniques, there is no necessary hierarchy associated with these tools. Thompson says that this in part comes from this

‘maker’ culture—which expands beyond repurposing digital media to cobbling together open-source software and hardware, hacking consumer electronics, and creating other functional devices like clothing and home décor all from information shared freely online. Drawing from the DIY ethos of subcultures . . . technology and the free and open sharing that makes this kind of collective

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid



Marc André Robinson's Myth Monolith (2002-03), in "Unmonumental", The New Meuseum.

development possible, maker culture encourages a much more direct and active physical relationship with our objects and devices.<sup>19</sup>

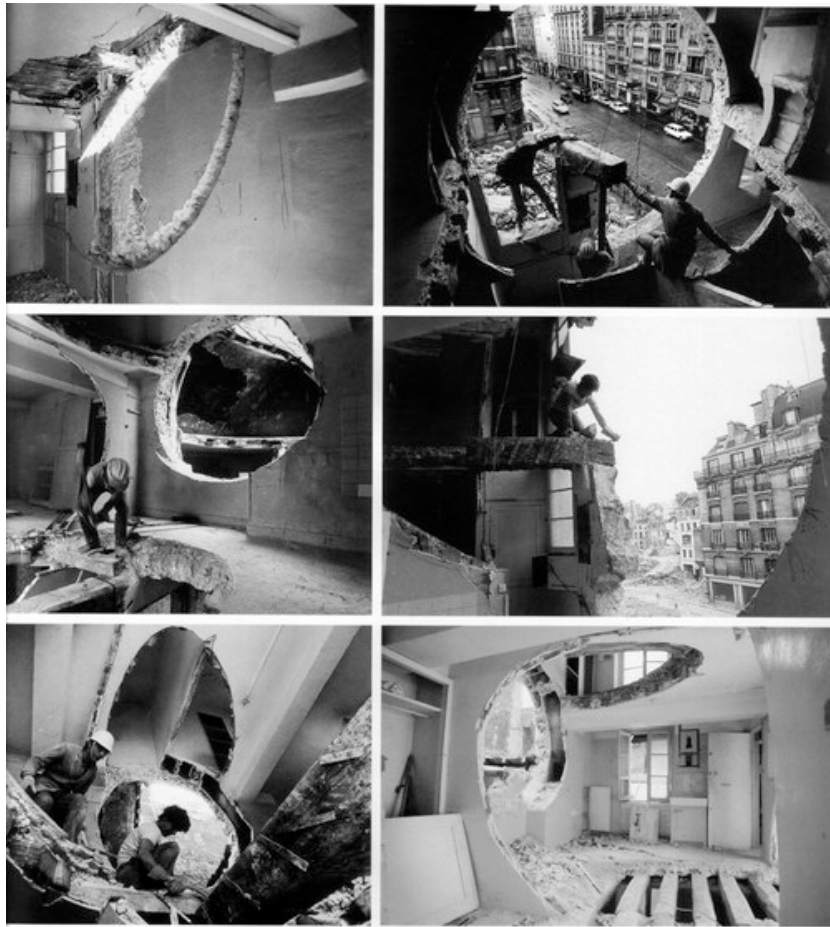
Thompson ties this all back to the photographer's return to the studio and the return to personal content in the larger art world. He sees it as not just a site of production but an almost metaphoric internalized space, a site of making and commitment. I am not sure that I totally agree with this generalization but he contrasts this with the detached, though strongly aesthetic style, that dominated much of the 90s work. Interestingly and relevant to my practice of intense experimentation, Thompson also makes the connection of photography to the laboratory and scientific practice.

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid



Photography was born at the intersection of the laboratory and the studio, and it has returned there again. Even while attempting to capture nature, to penetrate the outside world, photography's innovators were tied inside.<sup>20</sup>



Gordon Matta-Clark, the making of the *Conical Intersect*, 1975

## The Evolution of My Work Over the Last 4 Semesters: The Beginning

I entered school looking to expand my practice into something that could also involve the sculptural. My models were artists like Robert Smithson, Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Irwin, James Turrell and Olafur Eliasson who interrogated the structures of the built environment and how these structures helped create subjectivity. These artists also provoked questions about material and phenomenological transformations and boundaries.

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid

Entropy and thermodynamics were important ideas for me. Thermodynamics explains why water changes into ice and also why a substance burn and turns to ash. Materials have many manifestations, for instance sand can be made into glass or concrete. Around the time of the economic crash, right before I started school, there seemed to be a proliferation of broken beer bottles on the sidewalks. The more fragile, but cutting configuration of sand laying on top of one of its other, more lithic, formations--that is, a more ephemeral manifestation contrasted to something more immutable. The plan was tackle these issues in ways that were not just photographic, but that activated all the senses. I wanted to make sculptures and video installations to go along with my photographs.

### **First Semester: Culture's Traces Made Flat**

My first semester project touched on some of these issues. I began working with a motif that pre-dated school, my night time landscapes. The first departure was a move away from the perceived romanticism of that earlier work and utilized a pseudo-scientific aesthetic to give the impression of exploring different phases of the electromagnetic spectrum: x-rays in a forensic investigation. In retrospect, this was also the beginnings of a "photography about photography," an investigation of the materiality of its different spectrums. Or, as Trevor Paglen says,

Photography, for me, denotes a wide range of imaging practices sharing a common social, historical, and technological tradition . . . This includes everything from "art" photography to . . . MRI scans to the infrared eyes of CIA Predator drones"<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Paglen, Trevor. "SFMOMA | Research Projects | Is Photography Over?" *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA)*. Web. 09 May 2011. <[http://www.sfmoma.org/pages/research\\_projects\\_photography\\_over](http://www.sfmoma.org/pages/research_projects_photography_over)>.

Along these more process-oriented lines, Jeff Wall's formalism and hyper-constructed digital montages began to have an influence on the work. I was beginning to digitally alter my images to bring out the subjects' sculptural appeal, their materiality, and their "thingness". I was looking for evidence of human interactions and daily routines within discrete architectural spaces--construction sites, loading docks, and smoke-break nooks behind run down strip malls. The remnants and ephemera that



Jon-Phillip Sheridan, Direct Object #03, 24"x30", chromogenic print. 2009

were photographed--crumpled paper lunch bags, Styrofoam cups, and piles of dirt or snow--were suspended in a state of arrested instability. The goal was to leverage photography's ability to arrest impermanence into blocks of visual sensation that exist between presence and absence, and to embed this in the flat surface of the print. To





Jon-Phillip Sheridan, Direct Object #02 (x-ray), 48"x60", chromogenic print. 2009



Jon-Phillip Sheridan, Direct Object #10, 40"x40", chromogenic print. 2010

again reference Matthew Thompson, photography, “is an inherently analytic discipline”,<sup>22</sup> these pictures were about their photography-ness as much as they were about their referents.

This body of work has yet to become fully developed as my previously mentioned doubts started to take hold. I questioned my attraction to the photographic medium and became cornered with formal issues. If photography was failing, what was its elemental attraction to me and could I transfer that attraction to other mediums and leave photography behind?

### **Second Semester: Extending the Image into Space**

The second semester began a reductive inquisition of photography’s prime element, light. With the previous body of work, I had begun to see light as a material that could give the illusion of mass. This formal, abstract photography could be turned into sculptures or installations, as the structures could logically extend out of the forms in the images. I began to arrange and photograph materials--bubble wrap, plastic bags, fluorescent light lens--that were luminous or gauzy to capture light in form or to dematerialize the objects in light. Mirrors and their virtual images were also used in these pictures. The mirror image is like a photograph that moves; Oliver Wendell Holmes even dubbed photography, “the mirror with a memory.”<sup>23</sup>

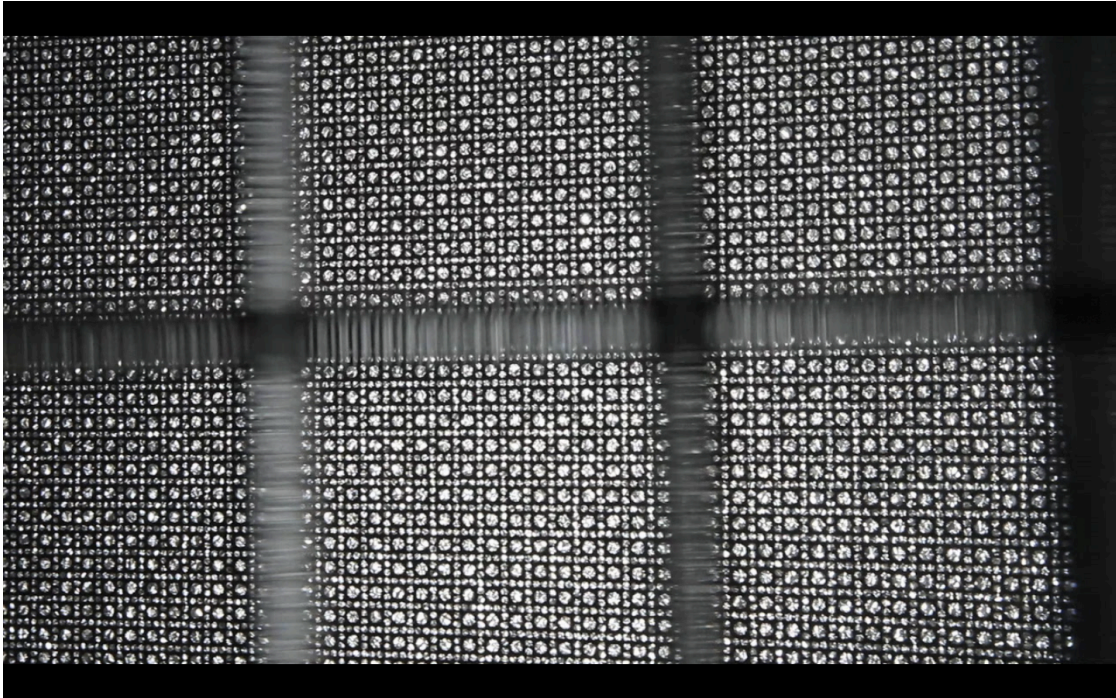
In addition, fluorescent light louvers and other grid-like or patterned materials were arranged in layers to give the images a structure from which the light would escape. These grids were frames, windows. As Rosalind Krauss explains, the

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<sup>22</sup>Thompson, Matthew. "The Object Lost and Found." Web. 08 May 2011  
<[http://www.aspenartmuseum.org/aop\\_thompson.html](http://www.aspenartmuseum.org/aop_thompson.html)>

<sup>23</sup>Ibid

grid appears in symbolist art in the form of windows, the material presence of their panes expressed by the geometrical intervention of the window's mullions . . . the window is experienced as simultaneously transparent and opaque . . . As a transparent vehicle, the window is that which admits light--or spirit--into the initial darkness of the room.<sup>24</sup>



Jon-Phillip Sheridan, Pattern Transmission, video still. 2010

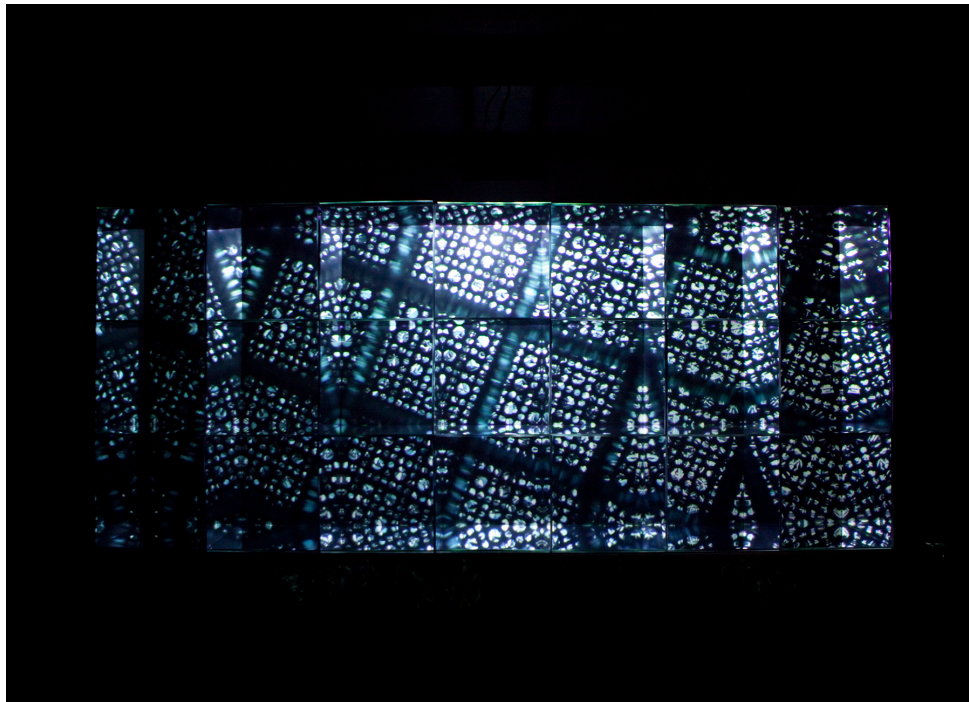
The grids were also simply architecture. Sculptural structures were to be built out of these image “modules” like one constructs a building with walls, as I was looking for ways to extend the image out into space.

In order to add a stronger sense of depth to these images, I started to add movement by filming them. When montaged, this video showed translucent and patterned elements shifting and rotating as they moved in and out of focus. The video had both an organic breathing quality and a mechanical stutter. I then replicated both the patterned forms and the mirrors represented in the film as a sculpture built out of a

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<sup>24</sup>Krauss, Rosalind. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Boulder: Westview, 1985. p. 16-17





Jon-Phillip Sheirdan, *Pattern Transmission*, video projection, acrylic mirrors, glass mirrors, slotted steel angle, Rosco filters. 2010

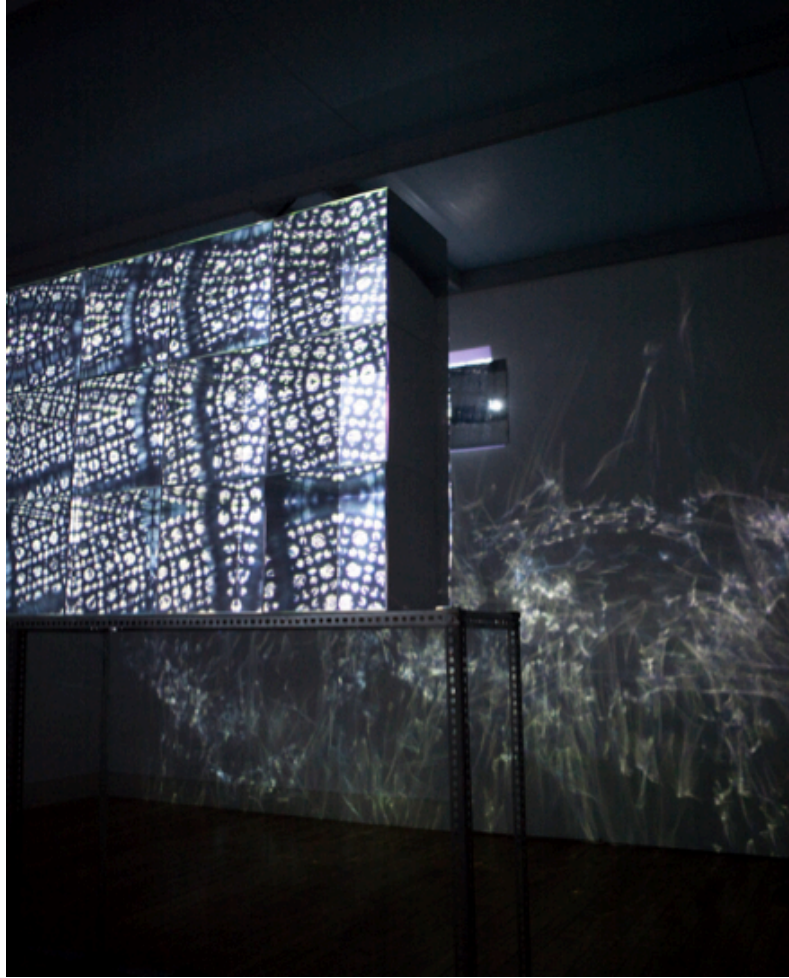
grid of open mirrored boxes with a rear projection screen. This structure was placed in a small darkened room where the video was projected. It was important for the installation to have a sense of a darkened interior chamber (an interior within an interior), a sensation that brackets the body and reinforces the sense of subjective viewing. This is an obvious reference to cinema, where the,

power of artificial light to create its own reality only reveals itself in darkness . . . The spectator in the dark is alone with himself . . . Every lighted image is experienced as the light at the end of the tunnel . . . and as liberation from the dark<sup>25</sup>

By turning the space into an image room with multiple reflections bouncing around, disorienting the viewer and hiding the original projection's origin, I attempted to break cinema's innate "spectatorial tension between the two-dimensional surface of the

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<sup>25</sup>Friedberg, Anne. *The Virtual Window: from Alberti to Microsoft*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2006. Print. p. 154



Jon-Phillip Sheirdan, Pattern Transmission, video projection, acrylic mirrors, glass mirrors, slotted steel angle, Rosco filters. 201

screen and the three-dimensional 'impression of depth'."<sup>26</sup> This achieved my goal of spacializing the image and allowing light to become a luminous building material. The grid structure functioned as a screen--the traditional window of cinema--but with an infinity mirror and kaleidoscopic effect, creating holes in the fabric of the space of the room.

### **Third Semester: Space Drawings with Tape and Other Holes**

My work in the third semester focused exclusively on the installation and sculptural, while continuing an exploration of the synthesis of light and material. I was

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid. p.20



interested in implying presence with absence and implying structure with the slightest of means, like the way a plane of glass is transparent but gives the impression of form. Light was to be used as a building material again, but this time only to outline and trace space.

In my final project of the semester I made a planar geometric structure out of mylar tape, a reflective and insubstantial material that when stretched taught gives the illusion of a more rigid substance like polished steel. When the thin but rigid looking Mylar lines outlined a perfectly flat plane, they gave the impression of structures of more substance like a pane of glass. Shadows from the lines, created with theater-like lighting, give the illusion of doubling the structure. Sometimes these angled planes seem to recede into the vertical plane of the wall, animating the wall's surface, and slightly shifting our associations from the concrete surface to the atmospheric. These contingent shadow structures change as viewers move through the space, the wakes of the viewer's shadows rearranging layers and forms.

This line sculpture was made inside a room with free standing walls. Within the walls of this construction were seamless, smooth conical holes that pierced the walls at varying angles and diameters. Although the holes were meant to be part of this composition, their implications began to fascinate me separate from the whole. In one way they functioned like the mylar pieces (though more solidly) by creating a fragmented view. With the holes viewers looked into a space, but their different angles was slightly disorienting, offering simultaneously varying viewpoints. The holes also functioned like vignettes into the space that the viewer was looking, and had a sense of



Jon-Phillip Sheridan, *untitled* installations views. 2010



Jon-Phillip Sheridan, *untitled* installations views. 2010

presence as they seemed to be things themselves, “immaterial bodies”<sup>27</sup>.

A hole’s existence is a bit of a mystery, it is a presence in the form of absence that triggers many psychological associations. Holes are negative indexes of their own shape, “mirrored in the topological structure of the surface of the hole’s host.”<sup>28</sup>

Roberto Casati and Achille Varzi theorize in their book, *Holes and Other Superficialities*, that “borders of the hole mark an interruption in the surface . . . thus it is by perceiving a discontinuity in”, a surface that identifies a hole. In this way a hole is a disruption<sup>29</sup>.

This led me to begin to contemplate surfaces. I started to think of the walls that the holes were “disrupting”. This opened up two paths. For the first, I thought about the continuous surface of an architectural space, which led me to various architectural theory studies, particularly French philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s use of space and architecture as metaphors in his ontology of becoming and difference in metaphysics and epistemology. Deleuze’s spacial concepts became widely influential, particularly his theory of the fold.<sup>30</sup> Here is Deleuze:

The outside is not a fixed limit but a moving matter animated by peristaltic movements, folds and foldings that together make up an inside: they are not something other than the outside, but precisely the inside of the outside.<sup>31</sup>

I was fascinated by the thought of space not as discrete units but as one continuous surface folded in on itself to make interiors and exteriors. We could now think of corners and doorways not as endpoints or entryways but as folds in a single topographical surface. This is a companion thought to Casati and Varzi’s idea’s of

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<sup>27</sup>Casati, Roberto, and Achille C. Varzi. *Holes and Other Superficialities*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995. Print. p.33

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.* p.7

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.* p.9

<sup>30</sup>Buchanan, Ian, and Gregg Lambert. *Deleuze and Space*. Toronto: University of Toronto, 2005. Print

<sup>31</sup>Deleuze, Gilles, and Seán Hand. *Foucault*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1986. Print.p.96-97

discontinuities in surfaces, for it did not just apply to holes: “A corner, a bump, a ridge, a crack”, a wrinkle, all “introduce discontinuities into an otherwise macroscopically world.”<sup>32</sup> A discontinuity is like a crease in a Deleuzian fold, a differentiating function that does not change a thing’s essence. Casati and Varzi say that corners exist in their sites like waves in the ocean, “you can take a whale, but not a wave, out of the sea. Nevertheless, the sea stays the same after the passage of the wave, just as it does after the passage of a whale.”<sup>33</sup> Here they expand on their idea of discontinuities,

Here there is an interesting analogy between corners and waves as disturbances . . . if a wave gets gradually slower as the liquid in which it propagates becomes more and more viscous (think of a stream of lava), at the end of the process the wave will be a corner.<sup>34</sup>

The second path in regards to surfaces examined veneers and superficial illusions, like the notion that walls are solid substances when in fact most are hollow modular construction covered in sheets of paper and gypsum. I found it very interesting that some people related to the holes that I had made as if they had been drilled through a solid substance. I started to think of the plain monochrome paper-surface of the wall in strictly illusionistic terms, almost like it were an illusionistic space of an representational picture. This led me back to the photograph, the ultimate illusionistic picture space on paper.

I decided that I would start an investigation of the veneer of the photographic print based on the same themes of surface and disturbance. I wanted these photographs to look like they were arresting disturbances in surfaces, highlighting an intrinsic quality of photography that freezes all motion in its images, but that also

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<sup>32</sup>Casati, Roberto, and Achille C. Varzi. *Holes and Other Superficialities*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995. Print. p.13

<sup>33</sup>Ibid. p. 15-16

<sup>34</sup>Ibid. p.16



reflected Casati and Varzi's idea of a wave transforming into a solid. I began to photograph wire mesh and other things that I had used in my "light material" work from



Jon-Phillip Sheridan, surface experiments, c-prints, 14"x19.5". 2010

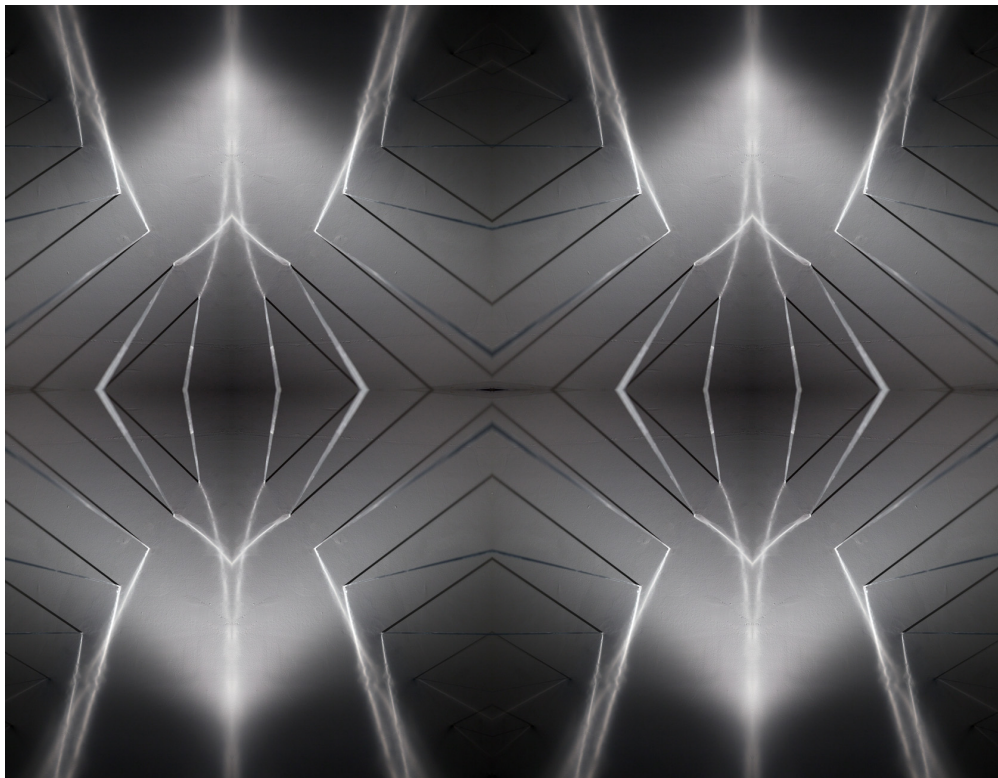
second semester, but this time arranging these materials topographically. I printed the images the exact size of the photographed referents and then crumpled and bent the prints into relief-like objects that approximated the the actual surface of the referent. This created a kind of reverse trompe l'oeil effect. The photograph became an object playing on the indexical quality of photography where the frame of the virtual window of the photograph also has been turned into the edge of the surface of the thing the photograph represents.

#### **Fourth Semester: Back to Pictures**

At the beginning of my fourth semester I decided to continue working with these photographs and planned to produce more elaborate photo-reliefs. It also seemed like

these new ideas provided an opportunity to return to the concept of sculptures generated from photographs, which could potentially be combined with my newest installations strategies.

First I began to photograph the tape and holes installation. The installation had a very graphic quality so it was easy to make strong images, but I decided to add another layer by making digital montages, which highlighted their graphic qualities, fragmenting the space of the installation into even more geometries, and generally disorienting the viewer so they did not know where the actual “real” photograph ended and where the virtual began. This work was an important transitional moment as I figured out what to do with the topographies.



Jon-Phillip Sheridan, untitled virtual space study, inkjet, 44"x60". 2011

I had been working with 3d computer programs to design my installation work and had been toying around with making virtual photographs rendered with CGI—the

idea was to make elaborate mundane images subverting CGI's usual use. The raw 3d look also had an appeal, particularly the geometric way the programs handled topographies. At the same time I was considering building elaborate topographic structures made out of plywood, but these plans had not moved beyond abstract ideas.

The idea of the Deleuzian fold was still in the back of my mind and I decided to be literal about the idea. I started folding paper, picking a substance that is the base material of the photograph and also the foundation of the illusionistic space of drawing and the space of thought in the form of writing. Also, the folded paper's geometry referenced the virtual geometry of a 3d space. For the first images, black construction paper and white tracing paper were used--a cheap photography pun--but I also wanted a contrast between images with a tangibly material (or corporeal) feel and images with a more atmospheric (spiritual) sensation. I folded hundreds of sheets of paper in arbitrary patterns so I could select compositions that had an un-composed look, referencing the natural topography of the landscape. The folded paper was photographed in a straight forward manner, as the images needed to function almost like photocopies or scans, a straight index of the referent. There was also a real sense of depth, of atmosphere that was the result of a simple transformation that the lens and the act of photography adds to all it captures. The photographs were originally printed at a size a little under twice the referent's original size. An ambiguity was created where the images existed between a transformational space that shifted between illusion and abstraction in a mundane trompe l'oeil effect where the paper in the photo felt like you could touch it. In the end these pictures also existed as another simple photography pun where I took a flat piece of paper, folded it into a reference of a three dimensional



Jon-Phillip Sheridan, Stratum I, 23''x16'', inkjet. 2011



Jon-Phillip Sheridan, Stratum II, 20''x14'',  
inkjet. 2011

space and then represented that same paper on another flat piece of paper.

After randomly folding paper, I turned to origami as I wanted to add a more specific and complex pattern to the work and thought that I could learn to fold various origami projects and unfold them to create topographies that would be reminiscent of the built landscape. Origami was also interesting as an adjacent topic to Deleuze's concept of the fold. At an abstract level origami and folding is about complicating matter, about giving form or difference to the formless and undifferentiated. In the book Geometric Folding Algorithms the authors state that folding, "starts with some unorganized generic state and ends with a more structured . . . state" and they go on to say,

Unfolding is the reverse process, but the distinction is not always so clear. Certainly we unfold polyhedra and we fold paper to create origami, but often it is more useful to view both processes as instances of "reconfiguration" between two states.<sup>35</sup>

Deleuze's fold is a conceptual tool that describes the creation of subjectivity, but it is also a powerful spacial and visual metaphor which makes it highly attractive to artists. Deleuze broke with the philosophical tradition that theorized a separation between the outside of the world and the interior of the subject. The fold is,

a critique of the typical accounts of subjectivity, that the presume a simple interiority and exteriority (appearance and essence, or surface and depth). For the fold announces that the inside is nothing more than a fold of the outside.<sup>36</sup>

Here the subject is the world's reflection, but it is the the type of mirroring that is like a cloth folded in half. This fold is not to be seen as a singular event with a stable barrier

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<sup>35</sup>Demaine, Erik D., and Joseph O'Rourke. *Geometric Folding Algorithms: Linkages, Origami, Polyhedra*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. 1. Print.

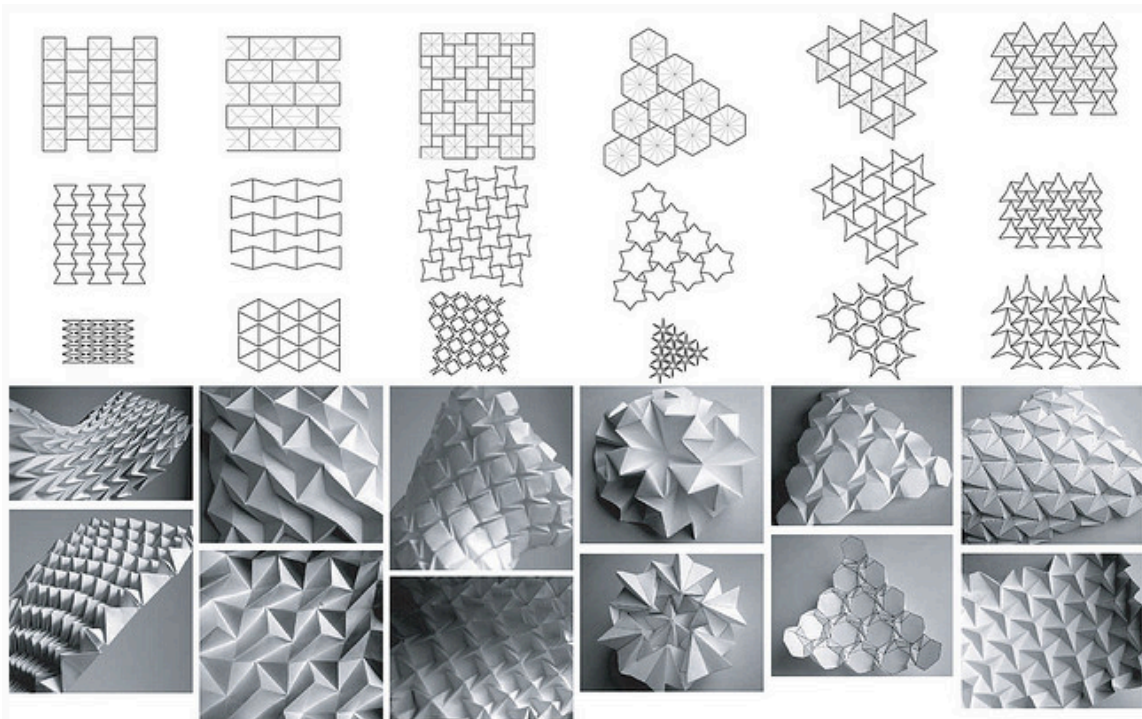
<sup>36</sup>Parr, Adrian, and O'Sullivan Simon. "The Fold." *The Deleuze Dictionary*. New York: Columbia UP, 2005. 103. Print.



between the outside and inside, rather this fold is folded infinitely and is constantly shifting.

Thus a continuous labyrinth is not a line dissolving into independent points, as flowing sand might dissolve into grains, but resembles a sheet of paper divided into infinite folds or separated into bending movements, each one determined by the consistent or conspiring surrounding... A fold is always folded within a fold, like a cavern in a cavern.<sup>37</sup>

For Deleuze, folding, unfolding and refolding are not seen as simply ordering and disordering. They are not opposites but are part of the same movements, because to unfold is simply to fold in a different direction, to add complexity in a different direction. Regardless, it is important to understand that Deleuze saw that the creases between entities differentiate them but they are all of the same piece of paper.



Daniel Piker, folded rigid forms from single sheets of paper. 2009

<sup>37</sup>Deleuze, Gilles. "The Fold-Leibniz and the Baroque: The Pleats of Matter." Architectural Design Profile No.102: Folding in Architecture (1993): 18

I was also fascinated to learn that folding, by way of the new field of computational origami theory, was being used to tackle a wide range of issues from manufacturing (sheet metal fabrication and foldable solar panels for space stations ) and biology (protein-folding).<sup>38</sup> The Japanese scientist, Taketoshi Nojima says that, "Origami theory can be used for anything . . . Because origami is everywhere . . ."<sup>39</sup>

These were the cross currents of ideas that were affecting me as I experimented with origami. In general, I was interested in the idea that Origami embodied multiple meanings. At the same time I looked for different potential expressions of the folded topological surface. Mirrors began to inter the work again, this time as the plane of an illusionary space analogous to paper's illusionary space.

The mirrors were broken to introduce discontinuities into this smooth space. However, instead of completely shattering the glass it was held together by a laminate covering the surface of the glass. This turned the fissures in the glass into creases and it abstracted the reflections within the mirrors, blurring them beyond representation. The mirrors were then crumbled so that they reassembled topographies and reflected different tones and different colors from various angles. The edges of the glass and what was behind it was revealed so there would be a double frame effect, and a kind of spacial stutter at the edge that breaks the frame by reinforcing it. This again plays on the index and heightens the objectness of the thing in the photograph and the photograph itself. The goal was to give the impression that they are abstract, yet since they are straight indexical photographs they can never be abstract in the truest sense.

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<sup>38</sup>"Protein Folding." *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*. Web. 11 May 2011. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protein\\_folding](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protein_folding)>.

<sup>39</sup>Krishnan, Sonia. "Ancient Art of Origami Shapes High-tech Gizmos." *The Christian Science Monitor - CSMonitor.com*. 17 Sept. 2003. Web. 11 May 2011. <<http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0917/p01s03-woap.html>>.

Yet I still wanted the viewer to be confused by what they were looking at despite the fact that all the evidence for them to fully understand was right in from of them.



Jon-Phillip Sheridan, Replicator, 50"x40", inkjet. 2011

For the two final variations on this theme small digital files of actual topographical maps were made into large photocopies and sheets of transparent glassine were folded and photographed with back lights. These two variations revealed the folding process as a type of mark-making, like drawing. First, folding the photocopies over and over again rubs away the ink, revealing the distressed white line of the paper. The pixelated images functioned as a sort of drawing, but also revealed the digital image's illusion of a

continuous image. The geometric triangle pattern that I folded into the paper compounds the image's association with the digital. The result was a mash-up of the sublimity of the map and large format photography, the cheapness of the photocopy, the handmade quality of the drawing-like folds and the virtuality of the geometry and the pixels.



Jon-Phillip Sheridan, Bit-Map, 30"x40", inkjet. 2010

The glassine images delved further into mark making. I had noticed that when glassine was heavily folded and distressed that it created a stippled effect. When back lit this effect, combined with the lines from folding, began to look vaguely like the crisscross markings on Jupiter's moon Europa or aerial photographs of urban development in severe environments. This tied into my original intent of these images referencing landscapes but also pushed the work back towards my interests in science.



Another important quality of the back-lit glassine was the granularity of its material which adds a layer of ambiguity, as the material can read as pixelation or film grain. The backlighting of this material also allowed the images to take on the sensations of light and atmosphere and geography at the same time. Again, like the earlier black and white photographs, this plays on the corporeal and the spiritual, but this time existing in the same body.



Jon-Phillip Sheridan, Nomad, 50"x40", inkjet. 2011

For much of the time when making this work I assumed that there would be more experimental exhibition strategies. For instance, my plan was to make my original “white” image a transparency mounted on acrylic that would be mounted directly into the



floor to give the impression of a solid plane of translucent image. The idea here was to extend the indexical effect of these images into another register of object-hood. In the end I decided against such strategies because my experiments kept undermining the very quality that was compelling about the straight prints, their photographic quality, their thingness as simple photographs. This realization completed the journey that started when I began questioning photography; I still was fascinated by the simple transformation of things by photography and recognized that it was still possible to



Jon-Phillip Sheridan, Plex exhibition view. 2011

leverage this into something that 4545 could be considered art. In many ways this was a coming full circle to a beginning that pre-dated graduate school when I was first learning photography. I recall looking at a Garry Winogrand book, I don't remember which one, but these dry words still come to mind, "Photography is not about the thing photographed. It is about how that thing looks photographed . . . I photograph to see what the world looks like in photographs."



Jon-Phillip Sheridan, Plex exhibition view. 2011